

VISITOR SATISFACTION AND VISITOR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ACADIA NATIONAL PARK: 2001

Meeting the Requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act



Acadia National Park Natural Resources Report Number 2001-09

December 2001

**Acadia National Park
P.O. Box 177
Bar Harbor, ME 04609**

**Prepared by:
Charles Jacobi, Recreation Specialist
Acadia National Park**

Abstract

In 2001, the National Park Service measured visitor satisfaction and visitor understanding of the significance of the park they were visiting through a brief visitor survey. Acadia National Park participated in this survey, which was intended to meet the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

In a brief report, the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit presented the results of visitor evaluations of park facilities, services and recreation opportunities (GPRA goal IIa1) at Acadia. Ninety-eight percent of visitors were satisfied with the overall quality of visitor facilities, services, and recreation opportunities offered by Acadia. This was above the GPRA servicewide goal of 95%. Responses to questions about the quality of specific facilities or services showed there is room for limited improvement.

Visitor responses to the question about the significance of Acadia National Park (GPRA goal IIb1) were compared to significance statements identified in the park's GPRA plan. According to servicewide standards for evaluating answers to this question (visitor identification of at least one park significance item), 94% of Acadia visitors understand something about the significance of Acadia. This is well above the servicewide standard of 84%. Eighty-two percent of visitors knew Acadia was significant for its scenery and twenty-nine percent knew it was significant for its recreation opportunities. Ten percent of visitors knew Acadia was significant for its cultural heritage and 8% knew it was significant for its natural resources.

When given the opportunity to make other comments, visitors mentioned the need for improvements to restrooms, better signing on auto roads, carriage roads, and trails, and showers in the campgrounds. Only a few people made mostly positive comments on the Island Explorer bus. There were also few comments about crowding and congestion.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Methods.....	1
Results	2
Visitor Satisfaction.....	2
Significance of Acadia.....	3
Summary of Other Comments.....	4
Conclusions and Recommendations.....	6
References.....	7

List of Tables

Table 1: Location, Day, and Time for 2001 GPRA Card Distribution.....	2
Table 2: Percent of Responses Matching One, Two, Three, or Four Acadia Significance Statements	4
Table 3: Percent of Responses With Specific Matches to Acadia Significance Statements for Scenery, Recreation Opportunities, Cultural Heritage, and Natural Resources.....	4

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, the National Park Service (NPS) measured visitor satisfaction at Acadia National Park and visitor understanding of the significance of Acadia National Park through a brief survey card administered to a representative sample of visitors. Satisfaction and understanding of significance had been identified as two important servicewide goals established by the NPS to satisfy the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

In this report, data from the Visitor Survey Card Data Report (see Appendix 1) prepared by the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit will be reviewed briefly. The Idaho report presents the results of very general visitor evaluations of park facilities, services, and recreational opportunities. We also present and analyze the results for the open-ended part of the survey card that asks visitors to tell why Acadia is significant and to give any other comments they wish.

METHODS

The University of Idaho established survey methods for all park units. At Acadia, four hundred survey cards were distributed on eight days between August 1 and August 31, at eight different locations (fifty cards for each). The locations have stayed the same since beginning the GPRA surveys in 1998. Distribution of cards was evenly divided between weekends and weekdays, and between two blocks of time, 8:00 a.m. to noon and 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Locations, days, dates, and times are shown in Table 1.

We selected sampling sites mainly for their high visitation, but there were several other considerations. Because of the division of the park and Mount Desert Island into an east and west side, we chose five locations on the more heavily visited east side and two on the less visited west side. The eighth location was made up of both Blackwoods Campground on the east side and Seawall Campground on the west side. Twenty-five survey cards were distributed in each campground.

Three locations on the east side were high use frontcountry sites. The other two locations were high use backcountry trail and carriage road sites. The carriage road intersection selected was between the high and low use areas on the carriage road system (see Jacobi and Manning 1997). The trail junction selected represents moderately difficult to difficult trails with high use. One of the high use frontcountry sites on the east side, Jordan Pond, was selected because of the concession there and the multitude of activities available (hiking, biking, and boating). On the west side, Echo Lake Beach was selected because it is a high use frontcountry area. The primary activity there is visiting the beach and a secondary activity is hiking. Ship Harbor and Wonderland Trails were selected because they are easy trails and they represent the frontcountry users of the Rt. 102A corridor with its easily accessible park attractions.

National protocols for distribution of survey cards call for contacting visitors on a frequency of every third person or vehicle if more than 100 persons or vehicles were expected in the four hours, and every person or vehicle if less than 100 visitors were expected in the four hours (see Table 1). This protocol was followed with the following exceptions. Where vehicular or foot traffic was heavy, we spread surveys out over the entire 4-hour period, instead of every third party. Sometimes a time interval was used (e.g. every five minutes). At the campgrounds, every thirteenth site was sampled (Blackwoods-it was raining-lots of campers at home) or surveys were evenly distributed among the loops (Seawall). Distribution was also adjusted from every third group to every group or vice versa when flows were inconsistent

Two hundred surveys were distributed by the Recreation Intern. Each Ridgerunner distributed 50.

Table 1: Location, Day, and Time for 2001 GPRA Card Distribution.

Location	Date/Day	Time	Freq.
Entrance Station	8/04/01, Saturday	8:00 – 12:00	12/hour
Visitor Center	8/05/01, Sunday	8:40 – 12:40	12/hour
Echo Lake Beach parking lot	8/06/01, Monday	1:00 – 5:00	3rd
Beehive and Bowl Trail Jct.	8/11/01, Saturday	1:00 – 4:00	every
Ship Harbor/Wonderland Trails	8/12/01, Sunday	8:00 – 12:00	every
Seawall and Blackwoods	8/13/01, Monday	8:00 – 12:00	BW 13 th
Campgrounds			SW 12/loop
Intersection 10, carriage roads	8/15/01, Wednesday	1:00 – 5:00	3rd, every
Jordan Pond Area parking lots	8/17/01, Friday	1:00 – 5:00	12/hour, all lots

RESULTS

VISITOR SATISFACTION (GPRA GOAL IIA1)

The data presented in Visitor Survey Card Data Report from the University of Idaho report is mostly self-explanatory (see Appendix 1 for details). The most important result was that 98% of visitors were satisfied overall with the quality of appropriate facilities, services, and recreation opportunities. This is above the National Park Service 2001 GPRA goal of 95%. The response rate was 23% (92/400 survey cards). The data are accurate to plus or minus 6% with 95% confidence. This means that if different samples had been drawn, the results would have been similar (+/- 6%) 95 out of 100 times.

Visitor satisfaction with restroom facilities, exhibits, and commercial services in the park had the lowest overall evaluation scores (4.2 or 4.3 on a scale of 1 to 5). A score of 4 out of 5 is still very good.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ACADIA (GPRA GOAL IIB1)

One of the open-ended survey questions asked, “What is the special significance of this park?” Visitors could respond by writing in as many items as they wished. Their answers were classified according to a series of four significance statements prepared from the Acadia National Park GPRA plan (National Park Service 1997). We revised these significance statements slightly based on visitor responses in 1998. These significance statements were followed closely. Exact wording was not necessary, but the concept had to be readily apparent from the visitor’s choice of words. This was not always obvious or easy, but most statements clearly fell into one category. If a statement contained one or more ideas that were different, both were used in the analysis.

1. **Outstanding scenery** – glaciated coastal and island landscape – mountains meet the sea – highest topography along the East coast of North America – Somes Sound the only fjord in the continental U.S. – preservation from development, especially the coastline – geology (as relates to topography) – tides.
2. **Recreation Opportunities** – many activities available – carriage roads, trails, hiking, biking, boating – scenic motor roads – park accessible to all users – public shoreline access – peace/quiet/solitude.
3. **Rich cultural heritage** – Native American history – French and British settlement – history of park formation, large land donations, visible proponents of conservation – historic hiking trails – historic carriage roads.
4. **Biological/Ecological (Natural) resources** – any mention of flora or fauna - exceptionally high biological diversity – presence of numerous rare species – unique mix of plant species that are at their northern and southern range limits – abundant wetlands – variety of habitats and communities.

We counted the number of surveys with any response related to significance, even if it was not included in our significance statements. Responses not related to significance and non-responses were discarded from analysis. Of the responses related to significance, we then counted those matching at least one of the four significance statements. Ninety-four percent (68/72) of surveys with responses to this question had at least one match. Four surveys had responses to the significance question but no match. The number and percentage of surveys with one, two, three, or four matches are shown in Table 2. Results from 1998, 1999, and 2000 are included for comparison.

Table 2: Percent of Responses Matching One, Two, Three, or Four Acadia Significance Statements*

Number of Matches	1998 (n=81)	1999 (n=126)	2000 (n=94)	2001 (n=72)
At least one match	82%	89%	91%	94%
At least two matches	21%	36%	39%	42%
At least three matches	1%	4%	3%	4%
Four matches	0%	<1%	0%	0%

*The percentages in Table 2 do not add up to 100 because visitors could give multiple answers.

Four years of data consistently show that visitors most often recognize Acadia is significant for its scenery, followed by recognition of its recreation opportunities. Recognition of the park's rich cultural heritage and natural resources is much less common. Table 3 shows the details. Appendix 2 contains the verbatim significance responses.

Table 3: Percent of Responses With Specific Matches to Acadia Significance Statements for Scenery, Recreation Opportunities, Cultural Heritage, and Natural Resources*

Significance Statements	1998 (n=81)	1999 (n=112)	2000 (n=94)	2001 (n=72)
Scenery	67%	74%	74%	82%
Recreation Opportunities	31%	40%	33%	29%
Cultural Heritage	3%	9%	15%	10%
Natural Resources	6%	8%	14%	8%

*The percentages in Table 3 do not add up to 100 because visitors could give multiple answers.

SUMMARY OF OTHER COMMENTS

Visitors provided many comments in the final section of the survey card. We established eight categories of comments as described below and grouped comments in the appropriate categories, although there is always a little judgment involved in this. Multiple/independent comments on each survey were classified separately. Under each heading, visitor comments are reported verbatim. A semi-colon separates the comments of each individual. A few of the more interesting ones are highlighted italics by the author.

Facilities and Services

Trails could be marked better; We enjoyed the improved bathroom facilities, continued upkeep of carriage roads and trails; well maintained; *Visitor Center: why 52 steps? Because the designer was an idiot; would like to see bike routes on paved shoulders of Rts 102 and 3 to use in transportation;* the trails were well labeled. Thanks. This has

been our best national park experience yet; *parking needs expansion at the Eagle Lake entrance to the carriage roads*; could not find rest rooms at Echo Lake Beach. Southwest Harbor Chamber of Commerce had no RR, sent us in to south of town; mark southern exit of Sargent Drive better on road and map; This is our fifth visit. Much enjoy the improvements to the carriage roads over the last few years; road signs sometimes confusing, inadequately marked prior to turn or attraction. Excellent roads and trails; *acoustics in visitor center is terrible*; more informative signs in reference to difficulty along hiking trails; The rest rooms at the campground could be cleaner and work better; Please keep the rest rooms as clean as possible; a few more signs would be good; *additional bike paths and trails will further disperse traffic*; More signage needed to alert of approaching landmarks, also visitor center not accessible to handicapped; the rode signs were confusing and sometimes misleading (oh it must be right around the corner); the maps for the carriage roads were hard to follow, destinations (i.e. Jordan Pond or Pond House) are not on signs at intersection signposts, also street signs aren't marked well, you should drive around the park like its your first time and you'll see what I mean; better markings on trails of different trees, flowers, shrubs; when asking about kayak launching at Seal Harbor, the person at the information booth was unable to give answer; *park personnel were very professional and courteous, especially the park ranger who gave me a \$20 parking ticket* (smiley face!); we received excellent service from park rangers and thought the ranger programs were excellent; the ranger programs are excellent;

Services Needed

More ranger programs needed. A wait of five days is excessive;

Concessions

Maintain tradition of full service dining at Jordan Pond House; We loved the opportunity to take the carriage ride; Jordan Pond House—staff has gone downhill!! Menu is overpriced. *Need to do something about overcrowding; surprise at the decline in quantity and quality of gifts from last year (gift shops)*;

Campgrounds

would have been better if campgrounds had showers; It was very inconvenient to leave the park campground to shower. The bathrooms need shower facilities; showers in the parks facilities; For Campsite 124a at Blackwoods, designate a footpath, so that we don't have to sneak past other tents; camp staff at Seawall could not be nicer-wonderful people-could use on site showers;

Resource Management

Take over more of Mount Desert Island for the park; I was disappointed in how chopped up the park is by small towns and landowners nearby; not a single man made thing should be added;

Congestion/Crowding/Visitor Experience

not crowded; *too many people* (visitor center), *too many people* (exhibits), *long lines to talk* (assistance from park employees); no dogs, team up with water company and provide

water to drink on bike trail and walk trails, clean up horse poop on trail; the visitor center was not available when we visited; *I greatly appreciate allowing dogs on most trails. I am more than happy to leash her; I live here year round and enjoy every season. I am 78 years. This place gives me energy and vitality. God Bless;*

Buses

Where were the buses? I only saw one the two days I was there; nice to see the shuttle service. Hopefully use will increase; can bus service be made more frequent so that you really don't need a car; Island Explorer shuttle bus is excellent;

General Impressions

This can't give you very useful information. Question too general; We've been here five weeks-fantastic hiking!! Thanks; We were only there one day and really enjoyed the experience; everything was fine; keep up the good work; beautiful surroundings;; Keep up the good work. We're impressed; Great Job! This was our fourth time back and won't be our last. Keep up the good work; high point of our trip to New England; we were pleased that there were no commercial signs or litter on the roads or beaches. It was all very natural; we have never been disappointed in any activity we have pursued over the last seven years; the best maintained nature setting I've seen, cigarette butts rarely seen, an incredible treat; this park is a national treasure and must be preserved; NPS and Mount Desert Island community do a great job managing high volumes of visitor traffic, it was all excellent, wow what a great place;

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2001 GPRA survey showed that Acadia National Park met the national goals for satisfaction (IIa1) and significance (IIb1). As with "significance" in previous surveys, it is clear the park should focus on improving visitor understanding of the significance of our biological resources and rich cultural heritage. Visitors know Acadia is significant for its scenery and recreation opportunities. Inclusion of our mission statement in as many publications as possible and posting it prominently in public contact areas is one of many actions that may help with this.

Based on responses to the significance question in 2001, we recommend adding to the park significance statements as follows:

To Outstanding Scenery—add geography.

To Recreation Opportunities—add learning/education

To Biological Resources—add clean air and water.

REFERENCES

Jacobi, C. and R. Manning

- 1997 Applying the visitor experience resource protection process to Acadia National Park carriage roads: A summary of research and decision-making. Technical Report NPS/NESO-RNR/NRTR/98-5. December 1997. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. New England System Support Office. 23pp.

National Park Service

- 1997 Strategic management plans: Acadia National Park, St. Croix Island International Historic Site, Maine Acadian Culture Project. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. 72pp.

This page intentionally left blank.

Appendix 2: Significance Comments

Particularly interesting comments are highlighted in bold by the author.

It is a place of natural beauty that has been preserved for the use and the benefit of all citizens.

National Shoreline—Nature meets ocean with few homes and development.

Its beauty.

Classic Maine coastline without the commercialism. Most of the rest of the New England coast is closed to the public(only for the rich).

Keeping this enchanting island available to the public. A place to recreate and think.

Paths and beautiful views.

The carriage roads, seashore, and geological features here are very unique and sensational—of great national significance.

Gives visitors the opportunity to hike along the Maine seashore and to get an aerial perspective from Cadillac Mountain and Beehive.

Perverses (ed. preserves?) the rugged Atlantic Coast as it was found.

Ocean, lakes, mountains, history to tell and preserve—a bit of paradise—a gift to us all.

This park is a jewel along with many other of our parks across the country. Access to the many varied(?) areas for so many is a key component of our park system.

People are drawn together from all over the country to enjoy this beautiful place together.

Its significance is to preserve the natural beauty of our country **for future generations**.

The preservation of open space from the destruction we call “development.”

It is a gift of landowners who felt passionately about preserving the land sea, flora, fauna, for future generations to preserve.

Preservation and protection of natural areas for all to enjoy.

The natural beauty of a mountainous region on the east coast. We must protect our parks!

The national significance of this park is to preserve the Maine coastline and also to serve as wildlife protection.

Preserves and makes available to the public a coastal treasure of incredible beauty.

The geography and history of Acadia are what makes it a national treasure.

So many sights/adventures to be had in one place. Incredible.

Treasure of undeveloped land and waterfront in midst of heavily developed private land.

This is a very beautiful park. The scenery and the carriage roads make it a unique national treasure. I especially appreciate the shuttle bus.

A national treasure-exquisite scenery-land, mountains, and sea accessible by most people to observe and appreciate nature and the environment.

(birds) Wildlife. First park east of the Mississippi, beauty of Maine coast.

Great beauty that should be preserved for everyone to enjoy.

The preservation of unspoiled forest, mountains, and rocky coastline.

Vistas-unparalleled areas of land, sea, and air so different from other parks and all together in one area.

Its natural beauty, **fresh air and cleanliness. Also no crime problems.**

I grew up in the south but have heard of this park all of my life and was very eager to visit. It is important to preserve as much as possible of the coastline in a near natural state.

Preserving open spaces and beautiful scenic areas for everyone to enjoy and not just wealthy able to purchase “ocean view.”

This park is one of the last places I’ve found on the east coast which is clean and preserved.

Untouched beauty.

Preservation of nature and **natural phenomenon.**

Maintain natural beauty of the area. Combining beach, cliff and mountains and forest in a beautiful way.

The unique topography, excellent carriage roads, and excellent recreation opportunities.

1. Preservation of natural beauty. 2. Recreational opportunities: hiking, biking.

Helping all people of the nation to truly be able to enjoy nature with all its wildlife in natural habitats. Enjoying creation and reflecting on our creator.

It is available to all the people. Geographically it goes from the sea to the mountains.

Historically the early 20th century carriage roads. Has something for everyone to enjoy and learn.

Nice representation of American coast line.

The park showcases many natural elements, such as the ocean, mountains, etc. The carriage roads are a great and unique asset to the park.

Preservation of a unique and rapidly diminishing resource on the Atlantic Coastline.

Preservation of traditional seacoast culture.

It preserves one of the most beautiful areas of the eastern coastline.

Tremendous scenic beauty-great hiking.

Maintains small area of natural beauty in apart of the country that is very heavily developed (east coast)

The fact that it was established by private donation shows that the public can make a contribution.

The beauty of the unspoiled coastline.

It is the quintessential boreal coast-rocky shore. Extraordinarily unique and beautiful and important historically.

Commercial aspects downplayed. A beautiful area – a model for people in their everyday lives.

To maintain the natural beauty of the earth which can be accessible-enjoyed by all.

It is a treasured outdoor resource based on its geography, multi-uses for recreational purposes, scenic beauty and ???.

Overall beauty of Mount Desert Island.

Preservation of the outstanding beauty of the area.

To provide a place to observe nature while respecting it and others.

Preservation of unique combination of woods, mountains, and sea for all.

The coastal area-northern tip of east coast

This is an outstandingly beautiful natural setting. Its preservation is vital so that it may be appreciated **by present and future generations.**

Preservation of a unique natural area for people to enjoy **and learn about.**

The uniqueness of the island-its beauty, its varied habitat and geology. Provides an incredible opportunity for education on a variety of themes, plus excellent recreation.

It preserves the ocean coast, its history, and great easy hiking trails and (A/V??) camping. Extraordinary beauty, fabulous hiking.

Acadia provides an unmatched balance of preservation and recreational opportunities in an environment unique to the northern New England coast.

Its natural beauty. Coastline and diversity in its land.

The beauty of its shores, mountains, carriage trails, and trails.

To preserve its beauty and natural accoutrements for “the people.”

Scenery.

The unique beauty of the rocky coast.

Preserving coastal area.

Its natural beauty.

Its geography is unique. There is such a variety in a small area-seacoast, mountains, woods, lakes and rivers.

The unique and varied landscape and natural beauty.

To give the opportunity for most of the people to discover the nature and exercise in a healthy and safe environment.

Statements made that do not relate to significance.

That too much of this continent has been disrespected and exploited by European settlers and needs to recover. Unfortunately, I’ve seen too many people vandalizing beautiful beaches. I don’t know if much can be done to prevent this, but educating people is important. They should understand that paying a fee doesn’t give them the right to destroy the “wilderness.”

Excellent park. One of the best.

Only Nat’l Park in NE U.S.

A part of what our beginnings are and what is still a part of Great Nation.

Good to preserve the diversity and uniqueness of different areas of the country for all to enjoy, **generation after generation.**

Its one of our best national treasures.